

OtherHand

The original search

On October 22, (the day after the van's discovery) around 10 AM, DVNP Investigator Eric Inman was flown in via CHP helicopter to the site. He performed an initial search and photographed the location. Other than Dave Brenner's tracks from the previous day, no other footprints were visible. Some food wrappers were found near the van, as well as some fecal material and toilet paper ("cat holes").

At 11 AM, Inman returned via the CHP helicopter to Badwater Road in Death Valley where he met with representatives of the Inyo Sheriff's Office (Detective Jim Jones and Corporal Leon Boyer). Following discussion, the Inyo Sheriff's personnel proceeded to the van's location via vehicle and Inman was flown back in around 1 PM.





Tracks left by the van's flat tires (E. Inman, DVNP Report)

With Sheriff's personnel present, Inman opened the van's doors and an examination of its contents began. While there were many items of interest, of particular note was an American flag labeled "Butte Valley Stone Cabin". This cabin, also known as the "Geologist's Cabin" is located in Butte Valley 4.1 miles westerly from the van's location in Anvil Canyon. This cabin is a comfortable shelter, somewhat stocked with food, with a good source of water adjacent to it, Anvil Spring. The flag had apparently been taken from the cabin and indicated the party had been to the cabin at some point.

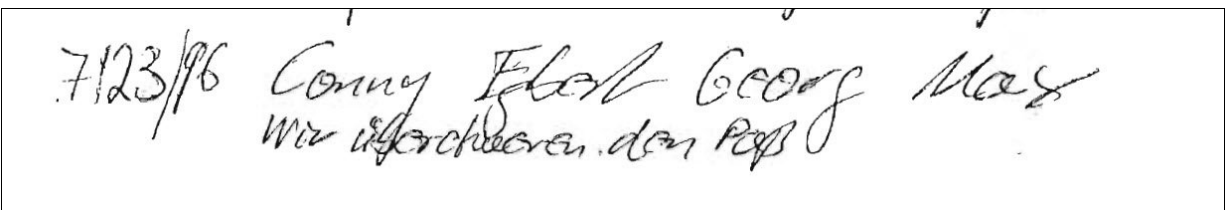
Some other items of note found in the van:

- Two unopened bottles of beer ("Bud Ice") and one empty bottle.
- One empty and one $\frac{3}{4}$ full bottle of bourbon.
- Several empty large water and juice containers.
- Luggage and clothing.
- Numerous exposed rolls of 35 mm film and a "Practika" 35 mm camera.

- One new Coleman sleeping bag in its box and one empty Coleman sleeping bag box.
- A tent.
- A pipe with tobacco.
- A leather card carrier containing Swiss bank cards and a Citicorp card for Egbert.
- Card from the “Sea Horse Resort” in San Clemente.
- Numerous toys.
- An unused compact spare tire and jack.

Under the direction of the Inyo Sheriff's Office, the van was removed from Anvil Canyon on October 23rd at about 2 PM by Miller's Towing of Lone Pine, and stored at their impound lot.

Back at park headquarters, a review of visitor logbooks routinely collected by field rangers turned up a valuable clue. The visitor logbook for the Warm Spring mine site, located on the route between the main valley and Butte Valley, had an apparent entry by the group. Although difficult to read, on July 23rd, it states in German, “We are going over the pass”, and was signed, “Conny, Egbert, Georg, Max”.

A photograph of a handwritten logbook entry. The text is written in cursive and reads: "7/23/96 Conny Egbert Georg Max" on the first line, and "Wir überqueren den Pass" on the second line. The entry is written on a piece of paper with a grid pattern.

Warm Spring log book entry (E. Inman, DVNP Report)

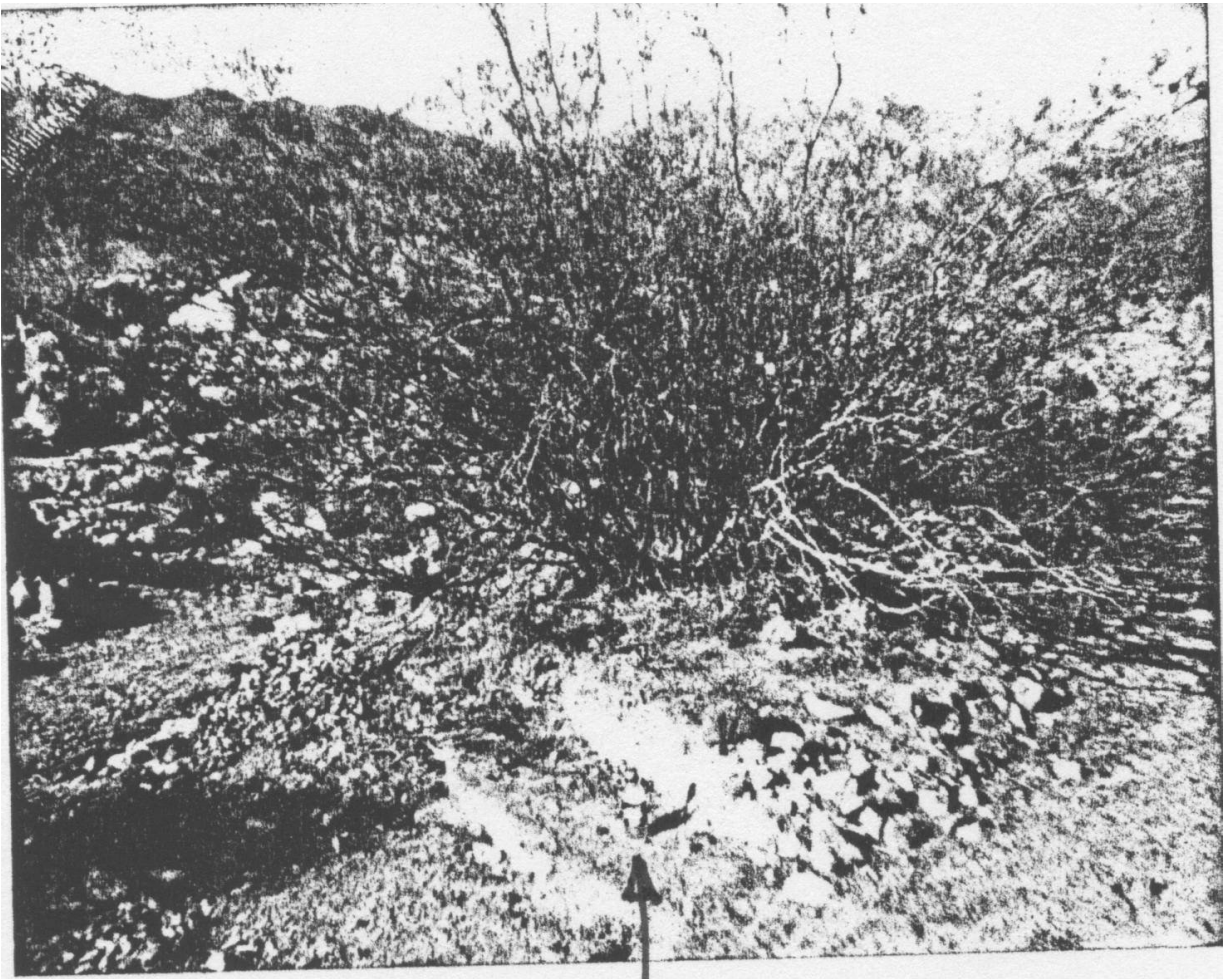
The pass referred to in the log book entry was almost certainly Mengel Pass, located a few miles from Anvil Canyon at the southwesterly end of Butte Valley, and the only means by which to cross the Panamint Mountain range for many miles. However it is an extremely rugged route, traversable by only the most competent 4wd vehicle and driver. It would be impassable for a vehicle such as the Germans were driving.

Further investigation showed that the party had not stayed at the Furnace Creek Ranch or Inn, the Stovepipe Wells Resort, nor had registered at the Furnace Creek Campground. Their whereabouts between being at the DVNP Visitor Center on July 22nd and signing the

Warm Spring log book on July 23rd were unknown at the time.

On October 23rd at 10 AM, the first searchers were in place. They included the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group (CLMRG), nine trackers from the Indian Wells Valley Search and Rescue Group and eight mounted units from the Kern County Sheriff's Mounted Search and Rescue.

On this day, members of the CLMRG found a Bud Ice beer bottle planted in the sand in Anvil Canyon, adjacent to a bush approximately 1.7 miles downstream (easterly) from the van's location. The bottle matched those found in the van. It appeared a ledge had been brushed clear of rocks, and someone left a large seat print next to the bottle. The placement of the sitting spot, on the easterly side of the bush, suggested it was to shade from a late afternoon sun. This clue was to be the first and last found in the initial search. The area searched this day covered much of Anvil Canyon from the van easterly to its mouth at the Warm Spring Road.



Beer bottle at bush with brushed flat area (E. Inman, DVNP Report)

Day two of the search, October 24th, brought additional teams and expanded the search area. In addition to CLMRG, Indian Wells and the Kern County mounted teams already on site, SAR teams arrived from Nye County, Nevada and Inyo County. Areas searched this day included more of Anvil Canyon, portions of Warm Spring Road and Butte Valley, Mengel Pass, the area adjacent to Warm Spring Road between the canyon mouth and Westside Road and from the van location easterly to the head of Anvil Canyon at Willow Spring. There were also two helicopters involved this day, both for searching and shuttling supplies and searchers.

Day three of the search, October 25th, expanded it even further. A team from DVNP searched the area between the mouth of Anvil Canyon and the far side of the main valley at Badwater Road. A SAR team from Victorville searched the southeasterly perimeters of Butte Valley. A BLM ranger began a search of the route on the west side of Mengel Pass, between Ballarat and Barker Ranch. A team from Lake Mead NP searched from Anvil Canyon northerly, over the mountains and down into Butte Valley. The Indian Wells team did an intensive search around Willow Spring, at the head of Anvil Canyon. CLMRG started from the middle of Anvil Canyon, then went north, then westerly. The same two helicopters were still at work shuttling supplies and searchers, as well as searching.

The fourth day of the search, October 26th, was the final day. The DVNP team checked areas northerly of Warm Spring Canyon as well as mine areas a lost person might have sought shelter in. The Victorville team performed searching around Striped Butte in Butte Valley. The Lake Mead team also checked Striped Butte, as well as walking the Warm Spring Canyon Road. The BLM ranger on the west side of Mengel Pass continued searching that area, as well as other possible routes the party may have used if travelling westerly towards Ballarat. The Indian Wells team searched the vicinity of Warm Spring Road and Westside Road when some footprints had been found. A vehicle SAR team from Apple Valley, new to the search, searched areas along Westside Road from Warm Spring Canyon Road northerly, where a party may have sought shelter. Finally, aerial reconnaissance was made via two helicopters in all quadrants surrounding Anvil Canyon (including south), but was hampered by high winds. At the end of the day, with no new clues found since the beer bottle on the first day, and no hope whatsoever that the party would be found alive, the search was called off.

This was truly a massive search performed by very competent search teams. The CLMRG people alone are some of the best in this part of the country. There were over 45 searchers in the field and two helicopters in the air at any given time and eight horses on the ground. Costs for the search were approximately \$80,000 in 1996 dollars. It was estimated by a DVNP spokesperson that 250 people were involved in the search at one time or another. The areas searched were well reasoned and a high probability of success was expected. Unfortunately, even a high probability is not a guarantee.

In the years since 1996, numerous additional searches were made, some by search and rescue teams, some by private groups. CLMRG in particular made a number of trips back to search additional areas and examine mine shafts. Searches by private groups tended to be more informal and less is known of them. Two of the more prominent individuals in this area include Dick Hassleman (a retired professor at Virginia Tech), and Emmett Harder (who had prospected in the Butte Valley area for many years). Both had conducted at least several searches in the area and wrote reports of their findings. Aside from these occasional searches, things remained calm and peaceful in Anvil Canyon.

During his involvement with this incident, Emmett Harder had been granted access by the Inyo Sheriff's Office to view the pictures recovered from the Germans' camera. Due to his familiarity with the area, he recognized a sunset picture, looking easterly down into the main valley as having been taken in Hanaupah Canyon, located about 17 miles northerly of Warm Spring Canyon. Given the presence of the Germans at the DV Visitors Center on July 22, and their Warm Spring log book entry of July 23rd, this suggests the Germans made camp in the upper reaches of Hanaupah Canyon the night of July 22nd.

A couple of environmental conditions at the time of the incident are worth mentioning. Death Valley in summer can be a formidable experience, especially backcountry travel. Even experienced desert travelers with well equipped vehicles may give second thought to such an idea. At the time the Germans vanished in Anvil Canyon, the following temperatures were recorded near the park headquarters at Furnace Creek:

Date	High	Low
July 22	123 F (51 °C)	91 °F (33 °C)

July 23	124 °F (51 °C)	96 °F (36 °C)
July 24	124 °F (51 °C)	91 °F (33 °C)

However due to the higher elevation of Anvil Canyon, the temperatures were somewhat more moderate. In dry conditions such Death Valley, the air temperature typically drops approximately 5.4 °F (3.05 °C) for every 1,000' in altitude gained (the “dry adiabatic lapse rate”). At the van’s location of approximately 3,100', it would have been about 17 °F (9.5 °C) cooler than Furnace Creek. Thus the high temperature at the van’s location on July 23 would have been about 107 °F (42 °C) and the low around 79 °F (26 °C).

The other environmental condition is the phase and rise/set times of the Moon. On July 23, 1996, the Moon’s phase would have been technically that of a “first quarter”. This means the Moon’s disc was half lit and half dark. It would be best described as a “half Moon”. Moonrise would have been at 1:24 PM and the Moon would not have set until 12:34 AM on July 24th, thus providing light past midnight.

[Next installment....](#)

Or back to the [Hunt for the Death Valley Germans main page](#)
